

## **Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations**

The main objective of the study was to explore and understand the experiences of divorced and separated Hindu women living in Vadodara. The study also aimed to understand how the lives of women change after divorce and separation, and the factors, patterns and dynamics associated with coping and adjusting with divorce and separation. Additionally, the study elicited the needs of divorced and separated women, explored the dynamics of their network of significant relationships, and their perceptions regarding happiness and success in life.

As a result of their socialization most women conceptualized marriage as a social norm and entered into it with a 'natural' preparedness. It was noteworthy that although marriage was awaited and hardly questioned much of the conversations with the participants centered on how difficult their marriage had been and how unhappy they were in their relationships with the husband and in-laws. The retrospective nature of the views is likely to be a mediating factor in women's construction of their views.

Although perceived as natural marriage may not be an institution in which one lives through effortlessly, especially in the Indian social structure of patrilineal kinship wherein the woman goes to the husband's and in-laws' house and is required to make all necessary adjustments. Marriage is a gendered institution where the socially constructed stereotypical gendered roles are expected to be carried out; and much socialization concentrates on this aspect. This was clearly reflected in the lived experiences of the marriage of the participants. Although marriage brought with it many unexpected and unwelcome changes and challenges, women preferred making adjustments and giving in to most aspects related to marriage because their primary motive was to fit oneself in the marital family. Regardless of their aims and aspirations, educational qualifications, or professional qualifications, what most women aspired for was to get married since it brought them the respect and honor which nothing else could. This finding is in line with studies by Dube (1997, 2001), Karve (1993) and Sen et al. (2009) which observe that all women are naturally prepared to marry and that single women are criticized and looked down upon. Women are respected the most only within marriages and this quest for respect from the society becomes a major reason why women continue living in a bad and abusive marriage. If marriage does not reap the perceived benefits, it does not mean that one chooses to opt out of it, rather one makes innumerable efforts to adjust and save the marriage because social messages and experiences make one believe that life outside marriage is worse and very difficult and is likely to have serious negative implications on self. The permanency attached to marriage, financial

dependence, presence of children, social stigma associated with divorce, and separation and fear of living life alone were some factors which delayed the divorce process and made it difficult to deal with. Additionally, this finding also reinforces the relational concept of self of Indian women, that is, to feel obligated to be obedient, sacrifice one's own needs and desires, and comply with the wishes of the members of the conjugal family.

However, being married was not a worthwhile option as soon as marriage stopped giving all the perceived benefits. It is noteworthy that initiation of the divorce process in most cases (21) was done by the women instead of their husbands and most of these women shared making endless efforts to save their marriage. Divorce or separation is opted as the last resort only when all other efforts fail and divorce appears as the only solution. At times the option of temporary separation is also exercised to save the marriage and not break it.

Further, even though divorce was perceived as relief from a bad marriage, it generated a host of factors which rendered the process distressing. Coping with divorce and separation was a lengthy process mediated by multiple interrelated factors, for example, passage of time after divorce, the available material, social and individual resources and the approaches used for coping. The experience of divorce called for some special needs as becoming single after divorce or separation is a more challenging situation in comparison to being single as in never married or a widow.

Loneliness was one feeling which most participants admitted experiencing. Friendships and intimate relationships for traditional Indian women are possible only within the boundaries of the extended family as a result of which social circles outside marriage are already limited. The experience of divorce further reduces these to a great extent, thereby making the woman feel lonely and like a misfit in the society. Divorce and separation were accompanied by two socially undervalued labels for the participants: 'divorced woman' and 'single mother'. On the one hand the women were seen criticizing the society and using strategies to protect themselves and their children from the stigma and society at large, but on the other hand they were seen as complying with the social norms and trying to give their children a sense of family.

Like marriage, divorce and separation are gendered and women are at a disadvantageous position whether it be within marriage or divorce. However, unlike the institution of marriage those experiencing divorce and separation are able to create the most agency for themselves. The journey of breaking away from the marital bond as well as the marital home was the most difficult and longest one for the participants because it involved changing the direction of one's life

altogether. It is obvious that when one begins the journey of marriage one is equipped with a mindset and resources to live through the marriage and not through divorce or separation. The journey of divorce made the women question their identities as wives and daughters-in-law. Until marriage provides the perceived benefits one does not question one's identity as a wife or a daughter-in-law. On not being wives and daughters-in-law anymore, the women made active attempts to explore and strive to be what they wanted to be. Divorce and separation thus served as gateways to finding one's 'real' or 'alternate' self.

As soon as divorce and separation occurred the women were confronted with many changes, most of which made their lives an uphill struggle essentially to be handled alone. Declining economic status soon after the divorce and separation was one factor which played an important role in deciding the quality of women's lives after their divorce and separation. Although the participants gradually improved their economic status by upgrading their career and education, a decline in the financial status led to a decrease in the overall quality of life. Living arrangement was one area where the participants experienced innumerable changes after their divorce and separation. Moving in with parents is what most women do after their divorce and separation and this practice is also socially accepted. However, almost half of the participants lived either alone or with children rather than living with their parents and siblings, and the half who lived with their parents expressed the desire to set up a separate household. This too reflects an increase in agency after the experience of divorce and separation. Financial independence and professional stability were two factors which encouraged women to set up an independent life and independent households after their divorce and separation.

Divorce and separation for most participants was eventually a liberating and a learning experience at a personal level. Many said that after their divorce there was transformation in their lives and that they rediscovered themselves, observed many positive changes in self, and felt independent. However, independence was accompanied by multiple problems and many women also experienced the feeling of insecurity out of the marriage. Divorce and separation was a platform to view themselves and their social positions more clearly than before. In one way divorce was a new beginning of self-development, and in another way it was also an opening to find an appropriate partner in future. On the one hand the negative experiences following divorce are so strong that they carry the potential to develop a negative outlook about marriage; in other ways however, these negative experiences also make an individual contemplate remarriage with a renewed conceptualization of marriage. As the data suggests participants reported feeling happy and successful, but expressed complete happiness and success only within the conjugal family set

up. Thus, in line with existing studies (Sen et al., 2009; Pothan, 1986) the findings of this study also suggest that most participants were open to remarriage. It can be thus inferred that marriage continues to remain the most accepted institution, even among divorced and separated women. In other words, despite accepting one's divorced and separated status, in the long run the women see themselves as married and having families, thereby reclaiming a much valued position in the society. In the Indian society intimate men-women relationships outside the marital bond are largely stigmatized and marriage is considered the only legitimate institution for such relationships. Hence, remarriage becomes the only way to satisfy the material, sexual, psychological and social need emerging out of the situation of divorce and separation. What was different for the women were the many conditions associated with remarriage, and if these were not met they preferred to and felt capable of living alone. This also reflects an increase in the agency of women, especially in decisions related to marriage.

The findings of the study reflect the theoretical perspectives that guided the conceptualization of the study and the analysis of data. As the theory of symbolic interactionism advocates, women, as a result of their socialization valued marriage above everything in their lives. According to the theory of social exchange and choice women expected marriage to give them rewards, but chose to leave it when costs exceeded rewards. Further, women still aspired to remarry but now if the marriage would not give what is expected, remarriage may not be a rational choice for them. As per the theories of adaptation and stress and coping women were seen eventually adjusting and coping with their divorce and separation. With reference to self of Indian women and the feminist theory it was seen that women's self was largely bound to social relations, and they made sacrifices to adjust in the conjugal family. However, the experience of divorce or separation initiated in them the process of searching for their inner selves, and upgrading their know-how and capacities to sustain in the patriarchal society.

Overall, the study found that the process of divorce and separation is a painful, difficult and life changing experience for women. One major change which women require to deal with immediately after their divorce and separation is decline in their financial status and standard of living and a gradual advancement in their career and education in order to improve their financial status. However, it was observed that those women who were financially independent coped and adjusted better with their divorce and separation, were happier and were more empowered in comparison to those women who were not financially independent. Participants who lived alone or with children experienced better lives in comparison to those participants who lived with their natal families. These women had fewer roles and responsibilities, more authority, freedom and

control over their resources and shared a healthy relationship with their significant others. It is difficult to decide whether the presence or absence of children aids in adequate or inadequate coping because all participants including those who did not have children, viewed it as a resource. Nevertheless, overall it appeared that those women who had children were better adjusted, took faster control over their lives after their divorce or separation as they felt responsible towards their children and found meaning in their lives through their children.

Loss in the familial status, that is, not being wives and daughters in-law anymore and being out of the marital bond is another major change which women face after their divorce and separation. Being a mother does not suffice to compensate this loss, rather it brings more stigma. Divorce and separation is not free of stigma and dishonor, given the legitimacy and glorification of marriage. In other words glorification and normalization of marriage, subordinate position of women and gendered discrimination, and the strong stigma attached to divorce shape the entire experience of divorce and separation in our society.

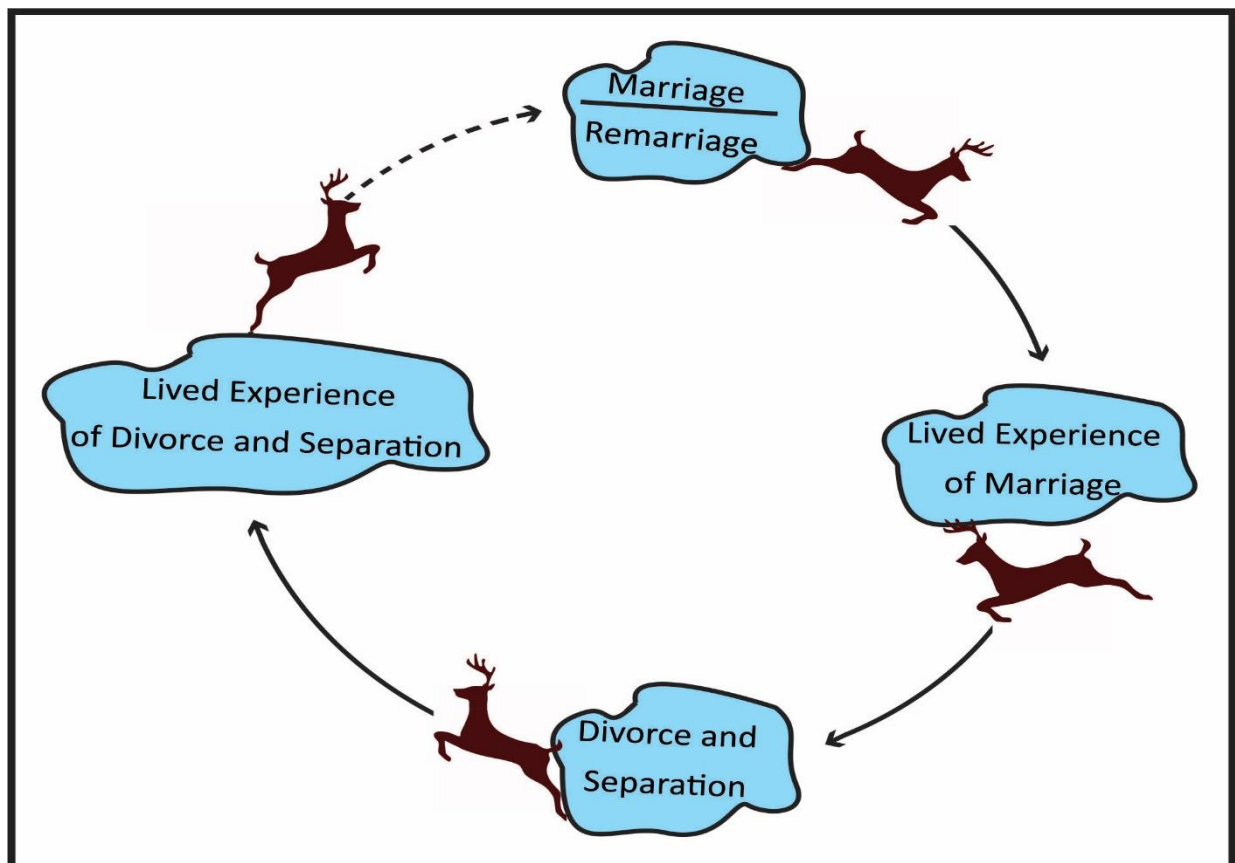
Eventually and in the long run the divorced and separated women adjust with their life situations. Most divorced and separated women accept the reality of their life and forgive their ex-husbands and other individuals associated with their divorce or separation. This was easier for women who were educated and financially independent. The adjustment after divorce or separation depends upon the overall circumstances of life and not any single factor. Those women who were divorced or separated before seven to eight years were more inclined to look beyond their divorce and focus on their career, children and self. Nevertheless, having a combination of adequate resources definitely aids the process of coping and adjusting with divorce.

One major need of divorced and separated women is to be heard non-judgmentally by someone and dealing with loneliness. Divorced and separated women have smaller social networks and very few relationships which they consider significant and intimate. In the long run divorced and separated women disengage themselves from the society at large. Nevertheless, they continue to behave in socially appropriate ways in order to find value and respect from the society and strive to carve their own niche in the society. Divorce and separation are largely unaccepted, hence support is not easily available to women undergoing a process of divorce or even to those who are already divorced and separated. Women who receive warmth and support from significant relationships during the turbulent marriage and through the initial process of divorce and separation live much better lives. In comparison, women who receive little or no support show signs of psychological disturbances in later life. The process of divorce and separation is

accompanied by a lot of struggle and multifaceted experiences which test one's resilience. The struggle that women undergo leads them to become stronger, more empowered, more capable to handle difficult life situations and develop a stronger sense of self in comparison to the marital period and even before that.

Lastly, most participants although conditional and apprehensive, expressed their readiness to get remarried or be in conjugal relationships predicting a more egalitarian relationship with their future husbands. Overall, most women in the Indian society seek happiness, fulfillment, respect, value and meaning of life only within the conjugal family set up.

The figure 21 portrays the cyclical nature of women's experience of marriage, divorce and separation and remarriage. The process is likened to a thirsty deer running after a mirage. The life of divorced and separated women is near to coming a full circle beginning with marriage, followed by the lived experience of marriage, living through the process of divorce and separation, followed by the lived experience of divorce and then aspiring to remarry. The journey involves struggle, uncertainty, disappointment, coming to terms and then moving ahead with a renewed sense of security and self.



**Figure 21. The journey from marriage to divorce to remarriage**

Thus, the experience of divorce or separation brings about some noteworthy changes in the lives of women. Some major changes in women's lives after divorce or separation are: decline in their financial status, loss in familial status leading to social stigma and single-handed management of some major aspects of life especially children. However, the experience of divorce leads women to eventually develop a stronger sense of self and gradually become financially and professionally stable. In the long run, divorced and separated women adjust with their situations with the help of a range of interconnected resources. Social support, education, financial independence, professional stability and presence of children play a major role in helping women cope with their divorce or separation. This reinforces the idea that education and financial independence expand the sources of self-worth of women. Additionally, divorce and separation lead to further reduction of women's social networks which was already smaller. On not being completely accepted by their natal families and being stigmatized by the society women learn to find happiness and fulfillment in their work and with their significant others. However, these women continue to follow the social norms and desire to be accepted and respected by the society. Eventually, divorced and separated women are confronted with a range of needs which they realize, can be met only in a marital relationship and therefore show readiness for marriage. It is notable that remarriage, unlike marriage is differently constructed by divorced and separated women. In the first instance marriage occurred unquestioningly and women made lots of adjustments and sacrifices giving least priority to self. Remarriage on the other hand had many conditions associated with it. The conditions for remarriage were mostly related to children and regarding not wanting to make too many personal and professional readjustments. This implies that divorced and separated women who have witnessed and closely experienced singlehood, marriage and divorce still look forward to marriage, but not at the cost of their self.

The methodological limitations of the study have already been discussed in the methods chapter. There is scope for further qualitative research on experiences of divorced and separated men and experiences of divorced and separated women and men from other religions and different socio-economic backgrounds. Although methodologically challenging, longitudinal studies on divorce and separation will reveal a lot more about the phenomenon and will also capture experiences of remarried individuals. In congruence with the Indian studies by Pothen (1986) and Singh (2013) this study also found abuse and violence as one of the major reasons for divorce. This shows that not much has changed in many years. Considering cases of abuse and violence in Fast Track Courts might bring some respite to many women suffering from marital abuse. Additionally, a peep into the quality of intact marriages and occurrence of abuse and violence, and

an in-depth understanding of why women choose to tolerate, will be some worthwhile studies. Awareness regarding the Domestic Violence Act and gender sensitization in schools and colleges with a special focus on domestic violence is recommended. This will in turn contribute in fulfilling the fifth sustainable development goal, that is, achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (United Nations, 2016). Finally, a large-scale quantitative study on social attitudes towards divorce and separation and towards individuals experiencing these will provide valuable insight into the societal attitudes towards divorce and separation in the contemporary Indian context.

The articulation of the difficulties and ups and downs of married life suggests the need for pre-marital counseling for both partners as well as their families. Additionally, post-divorce counseling is extremely essential because a woman is most vulnerable during this phase of her life.

The rate of divorce is on a steady rise and very soon the Indian society is likely to have more and more individuals who are single due to divorce or separation. It is important that the society accepts divorce as a social reality and treats divorced women not as deviants, but as respectable members of the society. Considering the above it is suggested that there be curriculum level changes in school and colleges wherein teaching about family should comprise not only that of an intact family structure of parents and children, but also include other forms of family like single parent families, step-families etc. This will contribute towards changing the gendered mindsets against single women, especially divorced and separated women. Further, the study also recommends that divorce and separation should be viewed and addressed as a public health concern. Spaces, clubs and organizations for women need to be created where they can talk freely, be heard supportively and connect themselves with individuals facing similar situations in life which will in turn enable them to cope with their divorce or separation.

The findings of the study will be useful to potential users like family life educators, researchers, academicians as well as to therapists and counselors working with divorced women and couples undergoing a turbulent marriage. A self-help book or a counseling module based on the findings of the study is likely to help women cope better and experience a sense of empowerment, knowing that they are not the only ones experiencing such feelings. This may possibly develop increased control over their lives and motivate them to stride ahead courageously.